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City hopes to restore derelict hall McCollum a piece of Fort Myers cultural history

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It takes a lot of imagination to envision McCollum Hall as a revitalized entertainment center, but that's what the City of Fort Myers has planned.

The building sits boarded up and padlocked at Cranford Avenue and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard. A sign listing it as slum property serves as final indignity to a once iconic site.

A visitor today would be hard pressed to imagine Louis Armstrong performing here or Count Basie, Duke Ellington, B.B. King or Ella Fitzgerald.

Now rodents scurry where dancers once swayed, and the rhythm of a big band has been replaced by patter from a leaky roof.

But the city wants to reclaim the building's glory days and save a part of Fort Myers history, said Don Paight, who heads the city's redevelopment agency.

Paight wants McCollum to be the jewel in a redeveloped city. It's a vision that could have a \$2 million price tag, he said.

"It would be a shame to lose it," said Mike Titmuss, the city's chief of code enforcement. "It is a building that has helped define who we are."

The pair believe the building once again could become an entertainment center.

That's just fine with the McCollum family, said Caroline McCollum, wife of the



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An artist's rendering of what McCollum Hall could look like when renovated.

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building's owner, Cliff "Buck" McCollum.

"As long as it's renovated and put to use, it's fine with us," she said. "A non-profit corporation would be great."

The McCollums had repeatedly told city officials they could not afford to maintain the building, Titmuss said.

Negotiations are under way with Cliff McCollum, Paight said.

"He really wants to keep his family's name on it," Titmuss said. "But he also realizes he can't afford to renovate the place."

Paight said the McCollum family will remain active in running the place. "They're also a part of this history," he said.

In the days of segregation, McCollum Hall was the only entertainment venue where black and white citizens gathered together. A rope was strung to separate the races, but that barrier quickly fell as the night wore on.

Pat McCutcheon, who won't give his age but said he has the 100th birth certificate issued in Lee County, used to book performers for the hall. He remembers when it was built in 1938.

"I'd love to see it renovated," he said. "It'll bring back a lot of old, good memories. I remember booking all the big bands in there in the '30s and '40s. People started dancing and that rope between the races fell."

Here, too, black servicemen stationed at Page Field in World War II had their USO.

Although listed as a National Historic site, the years have not been kind to McCollum Hall. Previous revival plans have failed. By 1970, its stage was empty.

Water continues to seep through its damaged roof, Titmuss said, making it a matter of time before the structure will be beyond repair.

In its downward spiral, McCollum Hall has been cited for 35 building code violations and racked up \$390,000 in code liens for its owners' failure to fix those violations. It was converted into a rooming house for a time and later became a home to squatters and transients.

Its appearance today is a ghostly shadow of its 1940s prime. Chipped beige paint covers an exterior where broken windows have been boarded over. The interior is ripped up. At the building's rear a rusted fire escape leads to an open space where the smell of urine attests to its use as a makeshift toilet.

Paight and Titmuss are working to change that.

"There's a very, very real possibility we can put together some kind of nonprofit foundation to take the place over," Paight said. "If we can make it part of a not-for-profit corporation this could be the focal point of a revitalization here."

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